

ENVISIONING BALANCE: MAPPING NATURAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND DIGITAL
SPACE

A thesis exhibition presented to the faculty of the graduate school of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Fine Art.

By

Michael Richard Polomik

Director: Richard Tichich
Director of the School of Art and Design
School of Art and Design

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ABSTRACT

ENVISIONING BALANCE: MAPPING NATURAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND DIGITAL SPACE

Michael Richard Polomik, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University, (May 2010)

Director: Richard Tichich

In order to map a new place, people must explore and record where they are traveling. My artworks are maps of my mind and soul - records of wonder, want, memory, and emotion. In this thesis investigation, I contemplate my future through recording my past, meshing valuable natural, industrial, and digital memories of space. Patterns and structures from these spaces are first extracted from their source, then altered and remixed during their translation into my work. Though still reminiscent of origin, most imagery in the final product collectively creates an abstract movement and energy to and from a central focal point. Subjects are employed in metamorphic, overlaid, and interactive ways, depicting a battle expressive of my reflections on their presence within my life. These reflections are emphasized through subtle symbols of measurement and time, such as charts, graphs, and the vortex.

My thesis exhibition explores these concepts through combinations of spray paint, schematic and gestural mark making, and 16th century Italian Renaissance painting style. These media and the processes involved in their application are inherently associated with the three primary categories of space that I express. Their collaborative context

provides the viewer with a unique way of analyzing modern life. Although I find our current environment dense, and at times artificial, it is in many ways beautiful. I want to look at my world in a different way through my art. Gaston Bachelard once said, "...It is in the opposite of causality, that is, in reverberation...that I think we find the real measure of the being of a poetic image" (xvi). Since my markings are intuitive interpretations of my environment, they thus provide a mapping of my psyche and what I believe to be a personal, visual poetry. Mapping my surroundings in this way opens new ways of understanding how I interpret them. Their presence in my work enables a source of reflection for the consideration of reliving past experiences to achieve a balanced future.

INTRODUCTION

Our architectural and technological advancements, as well as our ever-growing population, have resulted in many new inventions to both stimulate our curiosity and accommodate our existence. These increasing numbers of people and creations have provided us with a vast array of visual stimuli and perspectives on our surroundings. My research focuses on my appreciation of my own diverse visual experiences of these surroundings. Elements of different surroundings are brought together within a psychological and symbolic environment to contemplate the reliving of past experiences.

In Chapter One – MEMORY, I discuss how continual exposure to memory influences the value of memory. I also mention the specific memories that influence my work and how the work is an aid to memory. Lastly, I consider how multiple sources are used to access memory and how certain sources, such as photographs, can control how I translate the image of memory into the work.

In Chapter Two – SPACE AND PLACE, I explain the common differences between how we define space and place. I do this to clarify my successive discussions of the sources that my work borrows from and what they become during and after their translation into my work. Space is everything imaginable; place is tangible.

In Chapter Three – PATTERN AND STRUCTURE, I describe the importance of my observations of the different layers of anatomy within environments. I also discuss the importance of determining which characteristics truly define a form and the benefit of

using those in my work. I investigate the potential of remixing recognizable imagery in ways that achieve a new idea.

In Chapter Five – THE 4TH DIMENSION, I illustrate ways in which I utilize composition, subject, and value to achieve an awareness of time. These reinforce the relationship of memory and future.

In Chapter Six – LAYERS AND ASSOCIATION, I briefly examine the history of my use of layers and the order in which they appear in my process. Layers are strategically placed in order to reflect personal history and to achieve certain natural, industrial, and digital sensations of atmosphere. Lastly, I discuss the associations that the layers of my line work have with specific art historical references.

In Chapter Seven – TRANSLATING THE MAP, I list the advantages that mapping space provides in today's world. Altering a map and intuitively responding to its elements communicates a deeper psychological and personal activity. I support this theory with both critics and other artists writing and working in this genre.

In Chapter Eight – POSTMODERN CULTURE, I consider how perceptions of space fit in with the broader realm of postmodern art. I also explain why my materials and processes are relative in contemporary culture and how each strengthens my concept.

MEMORY

“It is obvious then, that memory belongs to that part of the soul to which imagination belongs... Just as the picture painted on the panel is at once a picture and a portrait, and though one and the same, is both, yet the essence of the two is not the same, and it is possible to think of it both as a picture and as a portrait, so in the same way we must regard the mental picture within us both as an object of contemplation in itself and as a mental picture of something else... Insofar as we consider it in relation to something else, e.g. as a likeness, it is also an aid to memory.” – Aristotle (as qtd. in Kline 2)

This thesis feeds a relentless hunger to cycle back through past experiences. The past always lingers in my head, beckoning me. It constantly influences my next move. I live a mapped out way of life that constantly reminds me of what I have done. “We are largely unconscious of the centrality of maps in contemporary Western life, but they are everywhere and profoundly structure our thinking and our culture” (Turnbull 54). Our memories are structured extensively within photo albums and online social networks. Our computers enable memories to be easily rehashed for us by their continual visual presence and easy access. These reproduced memories are seen so often that we are given a great opportunity not only to contemplate the memories of values essential to life but the values of our vision. Viewing a particular scene within an environment refreshes the past experience of it. My work explores my personal values of spatial imagery by combining memory; the work is an aid to remembering how much I value particular environments. The territories within my work, whether documented, borrowed, or created independently, are all spaces that I have experienced firsthand. They are derived from places and spaces where I have either lived, visited, or experienced on an intimate visual

level. They are all selective locations that I have relished and wish to continue experiencing.

Since my goal is to blend my many valued memories of place and space, my work consists of a multitude of sources to aid my memory. Photographic sources, as opposed to diary entries and other text-based descriptions of imagery, provide a quick record of place and spatial memory. The photographs used in this body of work are mostly chosen from my personal archives or those found during the course of online searches. Photographs play a large role in my reference material since they provide easy visual access to my memory. In fact, photographs help shape how I remember due to the nature of selective croppings and alterations imposed by the digital camera or computer screen, such as pixilation and light and color change. Also, I purposely alter these source materials through programs such as Photoshop, which enable me to derive line and edge in unique, and sometimes abstracted ways.

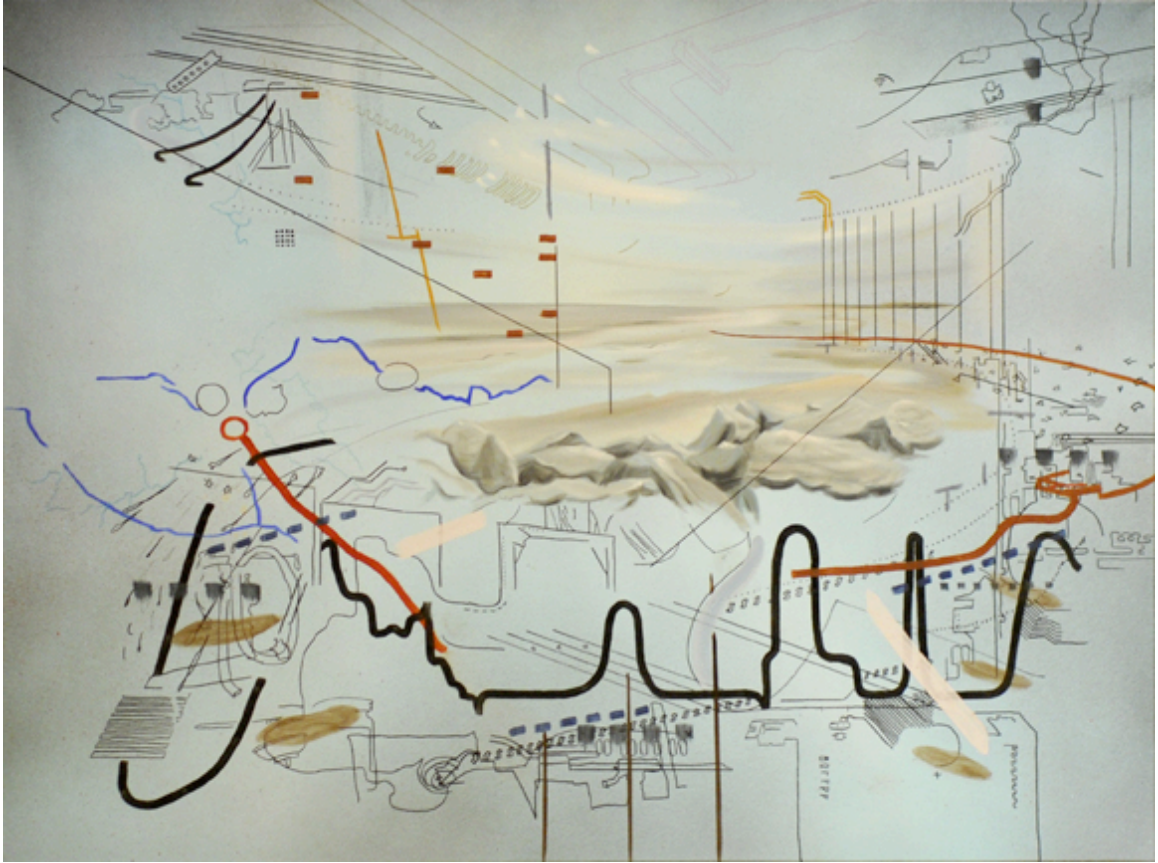


Figure 1. Michael Polomik, #9, 2010.
mixed media on panel, 30" x 40"

SPACE AND PLACE

When imagery is incorporated into my artwork, I am transforming place into space, and transforming virtual space into a new kind of space. The most common difference between place and space is that place is physical; we can touch a place. Space, on the other hand, is everything; it includes anywhere we can see or even imagine going. My computer screen is a place, whereas the website that I can see through it suggests a space. There can exist a similar relationship between a picture plane of any two dimensional artwork and its subject matter.

Tony Godfrey explores this relationship:

A painting is normally a flat thing, although it is often made so as to suggest a space behind it, like the space beyond a window. Alternatively it may, as we start to look at it, seem to activate the space between us... This may make us feel there is an equivalent space in our own minds. Three places for space to expand in or change: in the painting, in our mind, and between us and the painting. (210)

I consider this space within the window of my art to be imagined space within my mind. My work is not a mapping of place; it is only a map of space. All imagery of places that I use is altered either within a computer or within my mind before becoming part of the artwork; all places are transformed into spaces. So, when my compositions are coming together in the work, I am mapping mental space that is derived from natural, industrial, and digital sources.

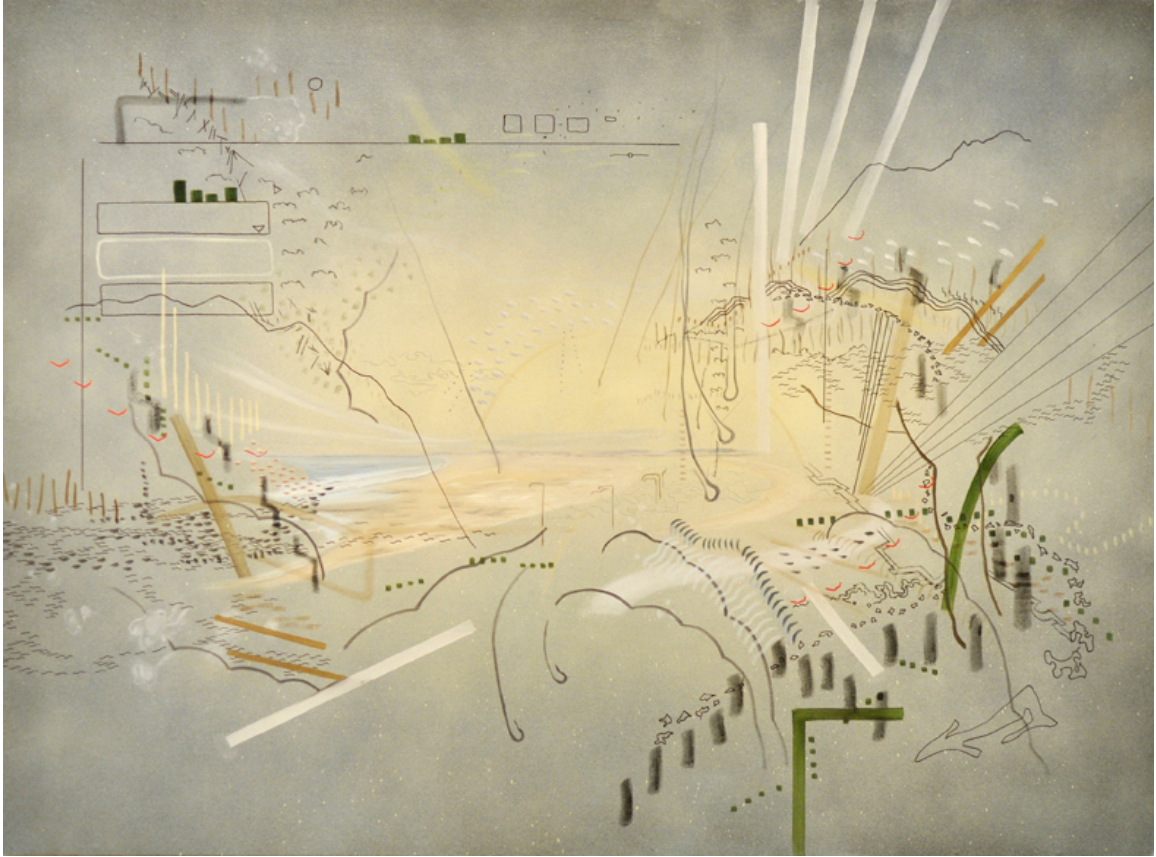


Figure 2. Michael Polomik, #1, 2010.
mixed media on panel, 46" x 62"

PATTERN AND STRUCTURE

Most of the sources of my imagery are derived from patterns and structures that I have identified within these physical places and virtual spaces. I am interested in the intricacy of biological and technological frameworks and systems; I want to understand and appreciate the many layers of anatomy that we have learned to see within nature and create within our inventions. Thus, much of my time is spent tearing apart old computers and flipping through microbiology picture books, researching and using these typically unseen structures along with those structures that I can perceive on a normal basis, such as the ripples of water or the bricks of a building.

There are digital patterns and structures present within my work as well. Patterns and shapes of websites and program windows, repetitions in graphic design logos and backgrounds, the icons of a desktop, and any other repetitions or units that I may visualize through my computer are all potential subject matter. Examples of these can be seen in *Figure 3*.

Each of these methods of observing patterns and structures are important to my work. Extracting them allows for their source to be simplified and reinterpreted into the space within my work; this enables multiple objects to be layered while still having the potential to identify the origin of each layer.



Figure 3. Michael Polomik, #4, 2010.
mixed media on canvas, 30" x 40"

Since I often borrow patterns and structures from others' archives and personal creations, such as Flickr accounts and web designs, my work can be categorized as a cultural remix.

Remix_theory.net discusses remix culture:

Generally speaking, remix culture can be defined as the global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies that is supported by the practice of cut/copy and paste... Reflexive Remixing takes parts from different

sources and mixes them aiming for autonomy... This strategy demands that the viewer reflect on the meaning of the work and its sources - even when knowing the origin may not be possible. (“Remix defined”)

I use online search engines to locate images of spaces that I have experienced, but that others have documented; I borrow designs from social networking sites; I use contours from icons on my computer. These are all raw source materials necessary to the multi-layered approach of my work. Collage artist Hannah Höch approaches remixing in a very similar way, as seen in *Figure 4*.

Remix_theory.net notes Hannah Hoch’s work:

[Much of her work de-contextualizes] the objects they appropriate... body parts of men and women [are] remixed to create a collage of de-gendered figures... each individual fragment in Hoch’s work needs to hold on to its cultural code in order to create meaning, although with a much more open-ended position. (“Remix defined”)

Though Höch’s work vastly differs from mine in both conceptual focuses and physical appearance, she de-contextualizes the figure much like I de-contextualize space. Just as she remixes male and female fragments to create a de-gendered, hybrid figure, I remix natural, industrial, and digital fragments to create a hybrid space. These fragments that I borrow and utilize, like Höch’s, are still recognizable. One can still sense that small patterns or structures within my work are either natural, industrial, or digital, but they are employed in altering ways that morph them into a new type of space. The recognition of this remix achieves a symbolic product of my message.

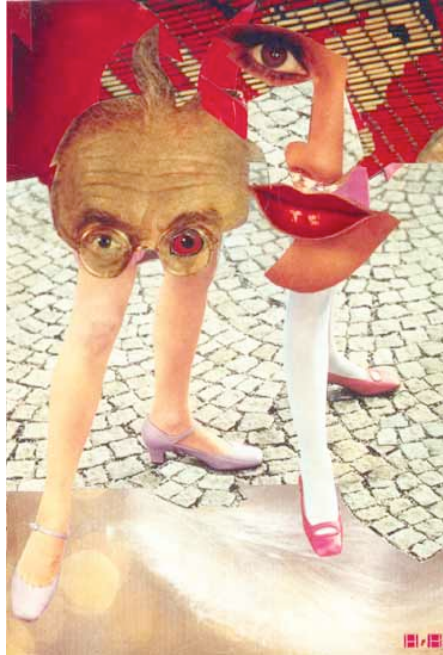


Figure 4. Hannah Höch, Grotesque, 1963.
Photomontage, 9 15/16" x 6 11/16"



Figure 5. Michael Polomik, #6, 2010.
mixed media on canvas, 30" x 40"

THE 4TH DIMENSION

The presence of time within my work is an important aid for my reflections concerning the continued presence of specific spaces in my life. “[To create] complex and inconsistent space is also to create complex time. The more we look...the more we see – elements and contradictions. It slows down” (Godfrey 219). The multiple patterns within the controlled chaos of my work embody this theory of time. Since multiple sources provide many different patterns within my work, there are many inconsistent things to take in and focus on. Observing these typically prompts a constant change of focus within the viewer, which can cause one to feel like time is going by faster than it really is; yet when compared to the speed and activity of the mind, time is slowing down.

Each pattern and layer contributes to this time factor in many other individual and collective ways. Charts, graphs, and other units of measurement through time interact with other elements. In addition, many patterns and structures are applied as evenly spaced repeating marks that suggest intervals.

The most prominent symbol of time in my work is the vortex. The overall sense of the vortex within each of my pieces achieves the subtle effect of a time portal. I use spray paint to create a distant, central light source within a concave atmosphere. Distant horizons depicted within the center of each vortex act as vanishing points from which successive markings create general movements to-and-fro.

The retreat of the center of each piece into space is also emphasized through the value and scale changes of the markings; value lightens and scale reduces to imply depth

of movement. However, the movements of all of these marks are ambiguous in direction. Are the compositions imploding or exploding? Are we traveling back in time or into the future? This ambiguity of time is reflective of my association of memory with potential future.

I have designed this body of work so that, when hung in a specific linear order, the pieces collectively achieve a subtle vortex effect as well. This effect is achieved through symmetry based around the center piece of a grouping. There are two groupings of five within the exhibition at the WCU Fine Art Museum. As one looks left or right from the center piece of a grouping, there are overall changes in scale and value from piece to piece that are symmetrical to that grouping. This creates a central push and pull to and from the center of the grouping, much like each individual piece possesses.



Figure 6. Michael Polomik, #8, 2010.
mixed media on panel, 32" x 48"



Figure 7. Michael Polomik, *Thesis Exhibition Installation View #2*, 2010.

LAYERS AND ASSOCIATION

The work applied to my surfaces utilizes a plethora of layers, each of which I have been working with for some time. The associations of my layers are tied to my past experiences of collage, old masters studies, and blueprints.

While fulfilling the requirements for my undergraduate degree, I was surrounded by many talented collage artists. Inspired by their techniques, visions of acetate overlays and translucent color radiate in my work even four years later. Each layer of each piece of this series was visible throughout its development and is still visible at completion, emphasizing each element's synchronicity and each piece's collage approach to paint.

Black gesso is the first layer I apply. Its presence beneath most paint provides what I find to be a very rich product. This rather unorthodox technique is one that I have carried on from many previous oil paintings. The black remains visible through many subsequent layers, especially at the edges. Spray paint is lightly hazed atop this layer, creating a sense of atmosphere and subtle digital pixilation.

Paint establishes the next layer, creating a realistically rendered horizon with edges that dissolve into the void in which it floats. These pieces of land that some have termed "islands", are constructed using painting methods that incorporate techniques from the old masters and from realist painters that I have directly worked with. The old master techniques are something that I have thoroughly researched throughout my graduate studies, resulting in many figurative oil paintings. Alongside this research, I experimented with many mixed media marker drawings and printmaking techniques. I

eventually fused these with the old master methods to break much of the work away from the tightness of these older techniques. This fusion formed the work within this exhibit.

The line work inspired from these earlier drawings and prints is the final layer to be applied. The schematic, biotech line work that these lines form atop the hazy colorful under layers reminds many viewers of science textbook covers. Growing up around my father had a lot to do with this association. Being a very artistic man and technical engineer by trade, he gave me paint by numbers landscapes at age six. The layout of color within these exposed me to the hard edge planes of color that translate to my work. He also provided me with build-it-yourself plane model kits and hand-me-down drawing paper, which was essentially his excess graph paper or scrap sheets filled with old equations and charts. This exposure to a technical, schematic layout influences my current line work and is the reason why each piece is reminiscent of an exploding blueprint. Straight parallel lines, like that of drafting paper, find themselves within the diagrams of each piece.

Though the line work inherently evokes a blueprint association, this is often interrupted with shaky and scratchy applications. These lines make use of gestural abstraction and the automatic writing techniques of the surrealists, especially Roberto Matta. Also, it should be noted that the use of symbols within this floating line is strongly reminiscent of the Medieval engravings of such artists as Robert Fludd, J. D. Mylius, and Donum Dei.

TRANSLATING THE MAP

The act of creating my work is embedded in mapping. It is difficult for one to avoid it in this era.

Janet Abrams and Peter Hall discuss the importance of mapping today:

Mapping has emerged in the information age as a means to make the complex accessible, the hidden image visible, the unmappable mappable.

As we struggle to steer through the torrent of data unleashed by the internet, and to situate ourselves in a world in which commerce and community have been redefined in terms of networks, mapping has become a way of making sense of things. (012)

Mapping helps to provide a unique context because it changes the way we see information. Abrams and Hall continue, “Mapping is also a core aspect of what designers do. To design is to invent strategies for building information that make new interpretations possible” (012). My pieces within this show are layered much as a graphic designer would build layers in Photoshop, designing and/or pulling information from different sources and overlapping it strategically. This manner in which each layer of information is applied opens the possibility for seeing these cultural maps more as mental maps.

Many artists today practice similar approaches. Artists Matthew Ritchie, Franz Ackermann, and Julie Mehretu are perfect examples. Tony Godfrey says that Ritchie, Mehretu and Ackermann are, “attracted to notions of a psycho-geography, where one

maps the world subjectively... there is a sense that what [they] are doing is providing neural maps and seeking to relate this to a sense of being in a body subject to gravity and motion” (218). These three artists all rely on technology to reinterpret their perception and imagery, using computer programs to alter imagery and projectors that enable them to trace it.

Julie Mehretu is the primary one of the three that breaks away from this simple repositioning of the digitally altered image. According to Godfrey, “Mehretu’s works are the most recent and most extreme attempts at synchronicity, the attempt to embody the all-at-once complexity of the city” (218).



Figure 8. Julie Mehretu, *Black City*, 2007.
ink and acrylic on canvas, 120” x 192”

Her work has a futuristic approach, attempting to capture the motion of the masses through the contemporary spaces that she re-contextualizes. She does this by extensively adding freehanded, intuitive marks to the initial marks guided by projected imagery. This takes the mental map concept one stage further as now we are not just talking about the viewer's mentality upon viewing a digitally altered image of the world; we are talking about the physical incorporation of that mentality into the work itself. Janet Abrams discusses these intuitive marks of Mehretu, writing of the work as, "encompassing both vast terrain (of imaginary landscapes) and the teeming frenzy of its denizens, abstracted to marks she terms "characters" whose behavior she discovers in the course of making them" (248).

These characters that Mehretu has termed have been discussed as "Ethos of Revolution" (de Zegher 17). They are derived from Mehretu's subconscious, evoking her reaction to the places and spaces she brings into her work. My work is similar in this sense, intuitively bending the lines of tree branches, or the lines within circuitry, to wrap around other elements, consequently mapping the reaction of my mind. The movement of Mehretu's line evokes human movement through contemporary space; her pieces carry a political weight with them – the mapping of a revolutionary act or thought. My line work, in contrast, depicts selective, interpreted memories of space alongside symbols of time and measurement – the mapping of a balancing act.

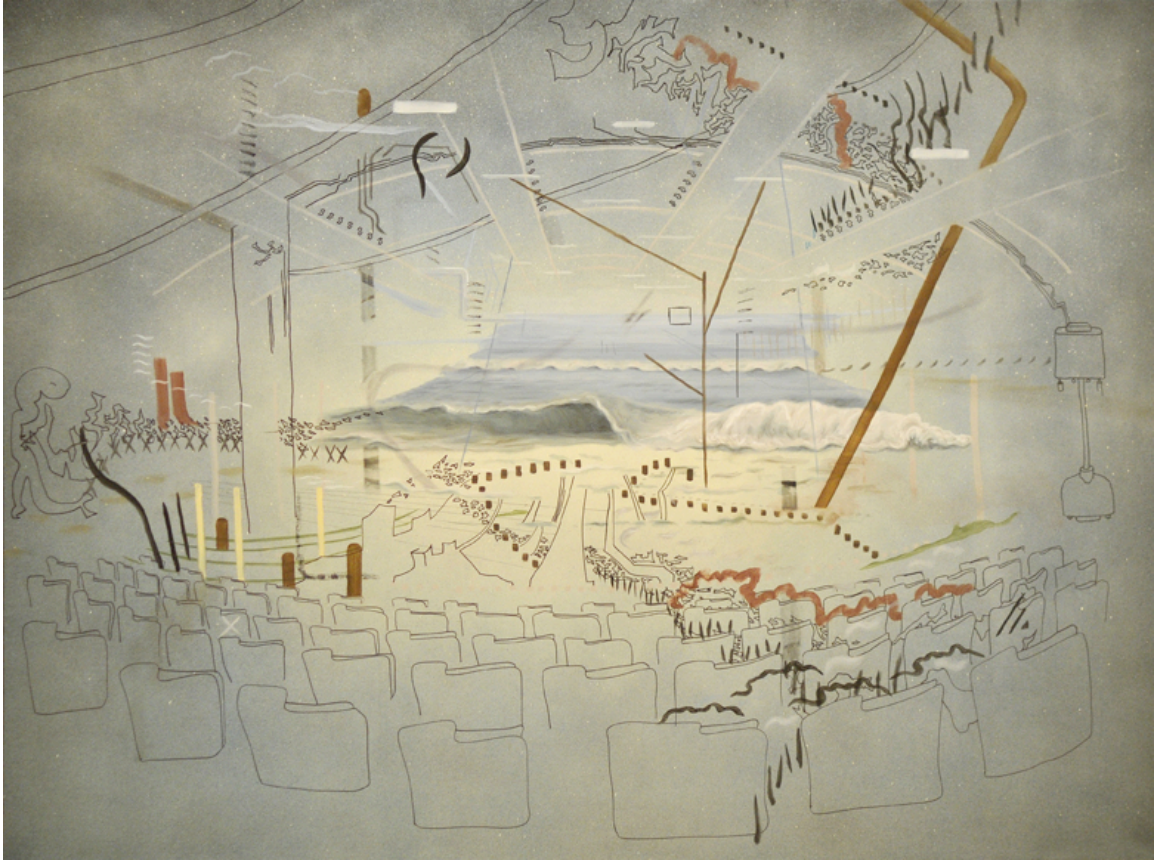


Figure 9. Michael Polomik, #5, 2010.
mixed media on panel, 46" x 62"

POSTMODERN CULTURE

“Our universe is a sorry little affair unless it has something for every age to investigate.”
 – Seneca, *Natural Questions*, Book 7, first century (as qtd. in Sagan xi)

Many artists today are addressing what it is to experience space. It is somewhat of a postmodern fashion. While distinguishing Postmodernism from Modernism, Fredric Jameson writes, “[Postmodernism looks] for shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change” (ix). Space is an exciting concept to explore in art today since man’s concept of space is constantly changing; we, as humans, are always altering our world and the ways in which we perceive it. Artists have been interpreting space throughout history, building ideas of spatial approach to what they are now.

Tony Godfrey notes:

The twentieth century [has] given us radically new ways of experiencing space: think of [leaning] into a corner on a motorbike at 80 m.p.h... or looking out as the plane banks over a big city at night... All this has added to our understanding of space – indeed changed it. But the new virtual space of special effects, computer games and the internet is still more radically different, leading, many believe, to an actual change in the very nature of our consciousness and identity. (210)

I am interested in exploring these changes of the psyche, using myself as the subject through these interpretations of memories and perception within collages of altered tree

silhouettes and pixilated skyscrapers. Godfrey goes on to pose the question, “Is painting the medium with which to explore and analyze these new space experiences?” (210). He leaves this question open ended. In my case, the multitude of places and spaces that I visually combine to communicate my message have driven me to use a multitude of tools and materials derived from each place and space. The presence of paint is of great importance to my work because the type of paint that I use is manufactured from earth, much like the charcoal I use. In contrast, the other media present in my work, such as marker and spray paint, are removed from earth. The luminescent and artificial surfaces these media produce are highly evocative of industrial signs, graffiti, and murals, as well as the digital reproductions of the computer screen. Lastly, the manner in which these materials are borrowed and employed, using the computer and a projector, is interrelated to the digital experience of space. Thus my tools and materials physically reconcile place and space much as my work attempts to do conceptually.

In the series of paintings titled “Envisioning Balance: Mapping Natural, Industrial, and Digital Space,” I have created a visual balance of selective space within environments that symbolize the exposure of space through time. My methods map both real world and virtual patterns that I witness as well as mapping my mind through the alterations and placement of my imagery. I will continue responding to the spaces around me and am eager to observe and interpret their changes and presence in my future.

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APPENDIX

List of Thesis Images on Compact Disc

1. #1, mixed media on panel, 2010. 48" x 62"
2. #2, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
3. #3, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 66" x 96"
4. #4, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
5. #5, mixed media on panel, 2010. 48" x 62"
6. #6, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
7. #7, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
8. #8, mixed media on panel, 2010. 32" x 48"
9. #9, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
10. #10, mixed media on canvas, 2010. 30" x 40"
11. Thesis Exhibition Installation View #1, 2010.
12. Thesis Exhibition Installation View #2, 2010.